

VZCZCXRO6367  
PP RUEHROV  
DE RUEHNR #5393/01 3630928  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 290928Z DEC 06  
FM AMEMBASSY NAIROBI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6252  
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 NAIROBI 005393

SIPDIS

SIPDIS  
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KCOR](#) [KE](#)

SUBJECT: Ethnicity & Politics in Kenya: Part 2, Kenya's Major Ethnic Voting Blocs

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite attempts to steer the political debate in Kenya away from ethnic considerations towards issues-based politics, ethnic identity continues to factor prominently. This message is a survey of the major ethnic groups in Kenya and how their perceptions and history manifest in Kenya's political context. The differences, and similarities, will be a factor leading up to 2007's general election. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) While polls suggest that issues-based politics is slowly gaining ground among Kenyan voters, the 2007 national elections will still largely be determined by the ability of key politicians to use ethnic rhetoric, money, patronage and muscle to win over ethnic voting blocs. By "ethnic rhetoric" we mean both appeals to group solidarity to promote the political influence of a community and hence the flow of state resources to that community and rhetoric that stokes traditional inter-ethnic resentments for political mobilization purposes. This message presents widespread subjective perceptions and outright prejudices about ethnicity that, unfortunately, inform the choices of many Kenyan voters. Some of these attitudes have a basis in historical and ethno-linguistic facts, but others do not. The ethnic classifications discussed here are based on how Kenyans commonly speak of various groups in a political context. These classifications may not correspond to those of an academic specialist.

¶3. (SBU) Kenya's population encompasses three of Africa's major ethno-linguistic groups; speakers of Bantu, Nilotic and Cushitic languages. (Note: Modern linguistic classifications employ different names for these language families, but Kenyans regularly refer to Bantus, Nilotes and Cushites and so we do as well in this message. End Note.) We assume a correlation between degree of cultural and linguistic affinity among various groups and their propensity to work together to achieve political aims. However, in some instances historical relationships trump questions of cultural and linguistic affinity, establishing another basis for political collaboration or political opposition.

The Bantus: Kenya's West African Immigrants

¶4. (SBU) Kenyans speaking Bantu languages account for about 67% of the population.

Swahili, Kenya's national language, largely consists of vocabulary drawn from Arabic and coastal Bantu languages with Bantu grammar and syntax. Aside from speaking related languages, most Bantu ethnic groups share common cultural characteristics, such as favoring cultivation over animal husbandry and certain initiation rites. Cultural similarities tend to generate political cohesion.

15. (SBU) The Bantu peoples originate in the area that now forms the southern frontier between Nigeria and Cameroon. They developed iron working technology and spread throughout much of Africa, reaching Kenya sometime in the first millennium AD. The most important Bantu voting blocs in Kenya are GEMA (the Kikuyu and their closely related neighbors, the Embu and Meru), the Akamba, and the Luhya.

16. (SBU) GEMA: The Gikuyu-Embu-Meru Association had immense influence during the Kenyatta era, but lost much of its political clout during the Moi years. GEMA at times used strong arm tactics like forced loyalty oaths and political violence to ensure that the people of Central province supported its political positions and preferred candidates. Today these three closely related peoples still tend to vote as a unit, although there is always some hard bargaining over the share out of patronage positions. The Kikuyu Kenya's largest ethnic group, number about 22% of Kenya's population while the Meru account for 6% and the Embu 4%, giving GEMA a very considerable

NAIROBI 00005393 002 OF 004

32% of the country's population. Kikuyu culture places a high value on land acquisition (just as other groups value cattle acquisition) and material success generally. Their perceived predominance in business, the professions and government attracts resentment of many other Kenyan communities. The Kikuyu-led government of Mwai Kibaki is massively popular among GEMA voters, although opposition leader Uhuru Kenyatta also has some support.

17. (SBU) Kamba: The Kamba account for about 11% of Kenya's population. The Kamba and Kikuyu languages are mutually intelligible, with a little effort. The Kamba occupy a geographic region between the Kikuyu-populated central highlands and the coast, thus they came to play a key trading role linking these two regions. The Kamba are generally more well disposed toward the Kikuyu than other Kenyan communities, but have gone their own way politically at times, such as during the November 2005 referendum on the draft constitution when GEMA-populated Central province largely supported the Kibaki draft constitution while the Kamba (and nearly everyone else) opposed the government's draft. Native son Kalonzo Musyoka, who polls higher nationwide than any other opposition presidential hopeful, is the most popular politician in Kambaland. Conventional wisdom predicts that if Musyoka does not win the presidential nomination of the opposition ODM-K party, then his Kamba supporters will line up behind Kibaki rather than support any of the other opposition leaders.

18. (SBU) Luhya: The Luhya are a grouping of around sixteen neighboring Bantu communities in Western Kenya, speaking different languages, having different traditions, but all labeled as "Luhya" largely for political mobilization purposes. Consequently, "Luhya Unity" is an oft talked about but seldom achieved political goal for the area's leaders. With 14% of the national population, the Luhya vote is heavily courted. Both government factions (NARC-Kenya, elements of FORD-Kenya) and opposition factions (ODM-Kenya, elements of FORD-Kenya) claim significant support from various Luhya sub-groups. The Luhya divided their vote during the draft constitution referendum. Most Luhya constituencies opposed the government's draft while the Bukusu sub-group of the Luhya stood behind favorite son Trade Minister Kituyi in his support for the government draft. The Luhya do not have the Kamba's close historical ties to the Kikuyu. They have been culturally influenced by their more homogeneous neighbors, the Luos; traditional political rivals of the Kikuyu. Thus the Luhya are considered less reflexively pro-Bantu than are other Bantu groups, and more open to cooperation with the Luo. Also, unlike the GEMA and Kamba, who are all entirely Kenyan, the Luhya are transnational, with a significant population in Uganda.

19. (SBU) Other Bantus: Other important Bantu groups include the Kisii, the Taita, the Pokomo, and the Mijikenda (a collection of small groups, like the Luhya). All things being equal, Kenyan observers tend to assume that Bantus will support a fellow Bantu candidate over a Nilote. (Cushites need not apply. See below.) Given the numerical predominance of the Bantus, this gives a Bantu candidate a major advantage. Moi, as a Nilote, was a master at ensuring that all things were not in fact equal. He gave specific Bantu leaders material reasons to support his presidency and bring their communities along with them.

The Nilotes: Lake, Plains & Highlands

110. (SBU) The Nilotic speaking peoples of Kenya are more culturally  
NAIROBI 00005393 003 OF 004

varied than the Bantus, and less than half as numerous. They comprise at most 30% of the population. They are divided into three culturally distinct groups: the Lake Nilotes (Luos), Plains Nilotes (Turkana, Maasai, Samburu) and the Highland Nilotes (Kalenjin).

111. (SBU) Luo: The Luos are usually counted as Kenya's second largest ethnic group, after the Kikuyu. They probably number about the same as the Luhya, at about 14% of the population, but, unlike the Luhya, the Luo speak one language and behave as a single, unified community. Like the Luhya, they have significant numbers in Uganda. The Luo place a high value on owning livestock, but they are settled farmers, not pastoralist nomads like their plains nilote cousins. The Luo are among the few groups in Kenya that do not practice male circumcision as a rite of passage into adulthood. This is a major

hurdle for Luo politicians seeking the Presidency, as other Kenyans do not hesitate to express the view that the country cannot be led by an uncircumcised "boy." While foreigners may consider this matter irrelevant to the question of national leadership, Kenyans cite the issue quite often.

¶12. (SBU) The Luos are known as intellectuals, with the stereotype being that they are more thinkers than doers. They were politically divided between Tom Mboya and Oginga Odinga during the immediate post-independence period. Following Mboya's assassination (often attributed by Luos to GEMA agents), the Luos have strongly followed Oginga and his political heir, his son Raila Odinga. They are firmly in the opposition camp. Foreign Minister Rafael Tuju, a Luo who abandoned Raila Odinga to side with the Kibaki government, is widely considered unelectable "traitor" in his home constituency.

¶12. (SBU) Plains Nilotes (Turkana, Maasai, Samburu, Iteso, Njemps): The plains nilotes are traditionally nomadic pastoralists. They occupy much of Kenya's section of the Rift Valley. Their combined share of Kenya's population comes to only about 5%, hence they do not represent a major voting bloc. As pastoralists, the plains nilotes often come into conflict with Bantu farmers. The Maasai and Kikuyu have both a tradition of violent conflict and of intermarriage.

¶13. (SBU) Kalenjin: Like the Luhya and the Mijikenda (coastal Bantus), the Kalenjin are a collection of small ethnic groups (Kipsigis, Nandi, Sabaot, Tugen, Elgeyo, Marakwet and Pokot) amalgamated into one ethnic identity largely for political mobilization purposes. The Kalenjin are cultivators and sedentary stock-raisers occupying the highland West-Central districts of Rift Valley province. They make up about 11% of Kenya's population. The Kalenjin were greatly favored for recruitment into government during the 24 year rule of President Moi, himself a Kalenjin. They remain steadfast supporters of the former ruling party, KANU. However, that party now is severely divided with former President Moi promoting one faction led by Nicholas Biwott and fellow Kalenjin William Ruto supporting another. Many Kalenjin voters remain loyal to their great benefactor, former President Moi, but his influence appears to be on a slow decline.

The Cushites: "Are They Really Kenyan?"

¶14. (SBU) Cushitic speaking peoples (Somali, Rendille, Orma, Borana, Gabra and Sakuye) occupy nearly half of Kenya's land area, but make up only about 3% of the population. They are not a numerically important voting bloc, although votes in Northeastern Province (the Kenyan Somali heartland) are sought after

NAIROBI 00005393 004 OF 004

in presidential campaigns due to the requirement for a winner to acquire at least 25% support in five of the eight provinces. Cushitic territory consists of Northeastern Province and the three

northern districts of Eastern Province. This region is arid, poor, remote and infrastructure starved. The cost of political campaigning per vote is extremely high compared to the rest of Kenya, which is more densely populated and better served by the country's road network.

¶15. (SBU) The Somali account for the great majority of Kenya's Cushitic speakers, forming 2.3% of Kenya's population. The next largest group is the Borana at 0.3%. Both groups are Muslim and transnational ("Borana" is simply the Kenyan name for the Oromo, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group.) The Cushitic speakers are considered exotic and foreign by many Kenyans. Somalis in particular are often viewed with suspicion and hostility by other Kenyans, who often question whether a Somali is truly Kenyan or an opportunistic illegal immigrant from Somalia. Cushitic political influence is further undermined by a tendency toward disunity and violent conflict among the Cushitic ethnic groups. The Borana and Gabra have a particularly bitter, bloody and longstanding feud.

¶16. (SBU) The Cushitic speakers have a tradition of supporting the former ruling party, KANU. However, there is a countervailing tendency to support whichever party is currently in power. As a Borana leader told PolCouns, "We are the poorest community in Kenya. We cannot afford opposition politics." KANU predominates in the Cushitic districts, but pro-government NARC-Kenya has made recent in-roads. As noted above, this vast region returns only a handful of Members of Parliament, although one, Mohammed Kutu, a Borana, is Minister for Youth Affairs, and has precious few voters. There will be minimal campaigning by presidential candidates in the north and northeast of the country and no serious consideration of candidates for national office from that region.

Comment: What Does All this Mean for the Elections?

¶17. (SBU) A few bottom lines to keep in mind for the 2007 national elections:

-- The ideal Presidential candidate as regards ethnicity is a non-Kikuyu Bantu. Such a candidate theoretically attracts the 67% of the population that is Bantu-speaking and yet dodges widespread anti-Kikuyu resentment. Among the politicians presently considered top Presidential hopefuls, MP Kalonzo Musyoka fits this bill.

-- Anti-Luo cultural prejudices widespread among the Bantu in general and especially intense among the Kikuyu play against the candidacy of Luo standard bearer, MP Raila Odinga.

-- The Luhya are unlikely to coalesce around a single political figure or party. The utility of a Luhya Vice Presidential candidate to mobilize the Luhya vote is limited. VP Awori is unlikely to be kept on by Kibaki for the second term.

Recognizing the need to steer politics away from largely ethnic identification, both ODM-K and NARC-Kenya aspire to successfully brand themselves as national parties. The task is a formidable one, however, as the legacy of ethnic politics will take a long

time to diminish.  
RANNEBERGER